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More Are Turning Gold Into Green

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Dan Reicher flipped open his briefcase and extracted two cherished bits of paper: a picture of his wife and daughter, and his electric bill.

"Thirty-two dollars and seventy-two cents," he all but crowed. For a full month last summer, that is what it cost to run the central air conditioning, lights, dishwasher, refrigerator, stereo system, television, computer, and every other electrical appliance in his three-story home in Chevy Chase, Md. "My sister lives two blocks away and her bill was about \$100. It was the same for some of the neighbors," he said.

Reicher, the Department of Energy's assistant secretary for energy efficiency and renewable energy, owed so little because his heavily "green" home produces as well as consumes energy.

In his Maryland house, Reicher is taking advantage of a law passed in 29 states allowing consumers to "sell back" to their utility companies whatever surplus power they generate. (In New Jersey, homeowners whose solar energy systems produce surplus power will be credited for that power, state officials said. The regulations allowing this are being developed.)

Only a handful of customers do this, say Potomac Electric Power Co. and Virginia Power officials. And

most of it comes from wind or water, said Jim Norvelle, a Virginia Power spokesman. "There isn't much solar because the East Coast is geographically challenged by a lot of trees and not so much sunlight."

At Reicher's house, 28 photovoltaic panels are mounted on the roof to convert sunlight to electricity. The panels normally sell for \$8,000, but Reicher paid only \$3,700, and the state of Maryland subsidized the rest from funds collected from oil companies fined for overcharging customers.

The house has two electric meters. A conventional meter outdoors measures consumption. It is wired to a second meter in the basement, which records how much energy the south-facing solar panels generate.

When there is an energy surplus, the outside meter runs backward.

Reicher and his wife, environmental consultant Carole Parker, sell the overage to Pepco's areawide grid.

Reicher and Parker were among 10 families in the first year of a national program to put 1 million solar converters on U.S. rooftops by 2010.

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